

Deal reached for rail cargo facility in city

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To bypass the century-old Howard Street rail tunnel, a chokepoint for East Coast commerce, state and city government officials have come to a tentative agreement with CSX Transportation Inc. to build an intermodal rail facility in Southwest Baltimore.

Leif A. Dormsjo, senior advisor and acting deputy secretary of the Maryland Department of Transportation, confirmed Tuesday that the facility would be built at the CSX-owned Mount Clare train yard, where cargo would be transferred from trucks to trains.

The Howard Street tunnel is too low to allow for the passage of double-stacked containers offloaded at the Port of Baltimore, slowing transportation of cargo once it leaves the busy port.

The Baltimore Sun first reported details of the tentative agreement.

Dormsjo said a letter was sent Sept. 6 to chairs of the General Assembly's budget committees in the House of Delegates and Senate. Those panels have 45 days to review an MDOT request for \$2.5 million in planning money, he said.

"We're hopeful that when they have all the info that they need," Dormsjo said. "[We hope] that they would concur that that's a good use of the funds. ... We would like, with their approval, to get started."

If approved, the legislature would debate including the cost of the facility — to total between \$90 and \$95 million — in the fiscal 2014 capital budget, to be finalized during the legislative session that begins in January.

CSX and the state would share the cost, a CSX statement said. CSX would also make another \$42 million in infrastructure enhancements. The statement said an intermodal facility would help reduce highway congestion while also "creating jobs and supporting regional business development."

A facility could be completed by May 2015 if all money is approved, Dormsjo said. That would dovetail nicely with the expansion of the Panama Canal, which is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2015 after the project experienced delays.

The Port of Baltimore is one of only two East Coast ports that will be able to handle supersized Asian ships that should visit Baltimore once the Panama Canal is reopened following widening.

In April, as CSX struggled against community opposition to a site in Howard County, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake suggested CSX look for sites in the city, south of the tunnel. Four locations were considered, and Mount Clare was chosen.

In a statement, Rawlings-Blake said a new rail intermodal facility will help “keep and grow jobs in the city while securing our port’s future economic growth for the next generation.

“This represents a significant economic investment in Baltimore and we look forward to working with [the] state of Maryland and CSX to review the proposal to utilize an existing rail yard and fully consider all related issues,” she said.

Dormsjo warned that a final decision was pending.

“We’re still very early on here,” he said. “But we feel good about the prospects for the project.”